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Meeting Summary: MENA Programme

Libya Study Group

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of discussions that took place during a small closed-door study group convened at Chatham House in January 2012. The meeting was aimed at analysing the current state of the Libyan transition, exploring its future challenges and suggesting possible solutions.

Some of the key findings include:

- The development of democracy in Libya should be a grassroots phenomenon, facilitated by local councils.
- The Libyan government's narrow understanding of security, which currently focuses on limiting violence, should be broadened to include economic security. The provision of employment and housing may lead to decreased frustration and therefore prevent violence.
- The dissipation of power and dispersal of weapons that resulted from the revolution is a positive factor in preventing the monopolisation of both by a single group.
- The value of tribes in providing mechanisms for arbitration should be recognised and used for national reconciliation.
- There is an urgent need for party-funding regulations in order to limit the entrenchment in the new political system of existing patronage structures.
- It is important to highlight the three main reasons why Libyans revolted, namely tyranny, cruelty and corruption, and ensure that each one is dealt with thoroughly or the likelihood of renewed violence is high.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

LIBYA: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Grassroots democracy

The discussion started with considerations about grassroots democracy and the notion of local councils, their importance for the country's democratic development and their possible role in the reconstruction of Libya. Drawing on experiences from other post-revolutionary societies, it was suggested that local councils often quickly disappear while so-called 'professional revolutionaries' who pretend to represent the people take over. A similar situation is currently developing in Libya – an ongoing struggle between young people who organise themselves in local councils and the established political parties. According to some participants, this is an unfortunate development as democracy in Libya should be a grassroots phenomenon. Its success is greatly dependant on the collaboration of local councils from throughout the country to ensure a greater level of representation and involvement.

Poisoned rhetoric

Throughout Ghaddafi's rule, the dictator's rhetoric praised grassroots politics and repudiated political parties. Unsurprisingly, Libyans will easily reject this kind of discourse. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise how these grassroots movements, so embedded in Ghaddafi's theoretical reflections on politics, eventually led to his removal and contributed to legitimising the National Transition Council (NTC). Ultimately, it was argued, one of the main challenges in recognising the importance of local councils lies in developing ways to express and describe what is happening in Libya, avoiding the corrupted vocabulary associated with Ghaddafi-era politics.

Local elections

The Libyan revolution was 'a massive parallel phenomenon' that led to a broad dissipation of power. The NTC as well as foreign governments are urgently seeking to centralise power in Libya in order to bring stability to the country. However, this approach was questioned as it was suggested that rather than fighting it, Libyans should embrace the current distribution of power and push for elections within local councils before pursuing national elections. In this way bringing about a new political order more representative of the particularities of Libyan society.

One of the participants pointed out that urgent decisions need to be taken in Libya that might require a more centralised authority. Moreover, the practical applicability of a fragmented power-structure in a heavily oil-dependant state was questioned.

Tribes

Many foreign critics see local councils as an epitome of tribal Libya. It has been argued that tribes can be both a destructive as well as a productive force. While they can often be insular, tribes are an innate component of Libyan society. A key value of tribal structure is the provision mechanisms for arbitration that could be fostered, especially in the context of national reconciliation.

A Fragile Libyan Cabinet

Participants acknowledged the growing criticism the new Libyan interim cabinet is facing, as it is struggling to deliver concrete reforms. Several reasons were listed for why this is the case:

- First, it is important to bear in mind that the new interim cabinet was formed by the NTC
- When the NTC was elected, not all of Libya was liberated. As such it cannot be considered a truly representative body.
- Closely related is that fact that, while its preliminary structure was conducive to success when established, the interim government is now asked to deal with tasks that go beyond its original purpose. In this sense, the council's structure is too fragile. A way to reinforce it would be through increased representation and consequent legitimacy.
- Finally, the government is currently in what was referred to as 'caretaker mode'. As such it is strongly limited in its decision-making ability.

Communication

One of the most persistent challenges facing the Libyan interim cabinet and any future government is communication. It was argued that the mechanisms for the consolidation of multiple voices in Libya into a single consensus through public debate are missing and need to be developed.

Prioritising Security

Security is often cited as the top priority in Libya. In this respect, the participants discussed the problem of a developing narrow view of security where the focus is almost exclusively on disarming militias. It was argued that a broad understanding of security should be prioritised where the provision of employment and housing play an equally important role. It was suggested that the development of better living standards would naturally lead to disarmament.

The creation of post-revolutionary revolutionaries

Instead the government's policy to subsidise militias has led to the emergence of so-called 'post-revolutionary revolutionaries' – financial hand-outs have led to an inflation of the number of revolutionaries who try to benefit from government subsidies. It was argued that this system further entrenches militias as it encourages people not to give up arms.

Alternative solutions

It was suggested that stability in Libya will not be achieved through traditional 'stabilisation models' which emphasise the role of a central command that exercises a control function. Instead, the dispersal of power should be celebrated and integrated as part of the solution. It was argued that the real danger in Libya is not dispersed weapons but monopolised weapons. It was argued that the wide dispersal of weapons ensures a mutually ensured destruction between parties and tribes that could lead to greater stability, in the short term.

Elections

A delegate noted how often the revolutionaries in the other Arab uprisings (Egypt and Tunisia) didn't do well in the elections following the revolution. The question arises whether a similar scenario is likely to develop in Libya. There was agreement that this is a real point of concern.

While there is some recognition that it is vital that revolutionary groups participate in the political process, there is very little time for them to organise and mobilise in competing parties. Above all, however, there is little funding. One of the main concerns with regards to party funding is that often public sector donations will come from highly corrupt individuals, this way reinforcing already established patronage structures. Hence, a key challenge to democracy in Libya currently is how to make sure that corruption don't

suffocate democracy in an electoral system where there are no laws concerning party funding.

Religion

In the absence of an effective government in Libya, the political vacuum is being filled by the highly organised and better-funded religious groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.

According to one delegate, there is an urgent need for religious metapolitics – creating a framework of moral and spiritual guidelines preventing the use of religion as a political tool. This was seen as the main task of religious scholars in Libya at the moment.

Foreign relations

A problematic factor for Libya is its disproportionate wealth in comparison to its neighbours. Participants argued that a long-term model of foreign relations will need to be developed in Libya that symbiotically protects Libyan interests while simultaneously providing enough support for its neighbours to discourage hostile relations, which, if escalated, may lead to open conflict.

It was also mentioned that Libyans are strongly independent, and therefore will not accept Egyptians, Tunisians or Maltese working on their behalf. At the same time, however, Libyans need to realise that cooperation with other countries is not necessarily negative – sovereignty does not mean isolationism.

Relations with Qatar

Discussion also focused on the more complex relationship between Libya and Qatar. Qatar played a vital role in the Libyan uprisings providing extensive and vital support to the rebels. But there is now a sense developing that Qatar is trying to interfere and directly influence Libyan politics. It was argued at the meeting, however, that this is largely a misunderstanding of what has been happening behind the scenes, as Qataris were misled by Libyan routers into delivering aid through unofficial channels, with the resulting enrichment of individuals with clear political interests. There was consensus that overall, Qatar has been a positive force behind Libya's liberation.

Corruption and the NOC

One of the questions related to the future of the Libyan National Oil Company (NOC). It was suggested that for the NOC to thrive, there should be an

element of artificial competition among its subsidiaries to maximise their efficiency. But the NOC faces a number of other problems, which are mainly related to the way it was designed and run under the previous regime. Ridding the company of corruption will not be an easy task and, despite its urgency, there is a fear that the government may be too fragile to deal with it at the moment.

There was some disagreement on whether there should be an investigation of the contracts. A participant argued that, rather than aggressive investigations, it would be in the interest of international companies to ask for 'adjustments'. If grievances relating to unfair contracts or corrupt officials are not dealt with, there will be more protests. Hope was expressed that multinational companies will understand that such adjustments are not against Western business or capitalism.

Federalism

Prompted by recent calls for federalism in Libya, one delegate asked how likely this scenario would be. It was pointed out that often demands for federalism coming from the East are a way of attracting government attention. Overall it is safe to assume that Libyans want to stay united. But certainly the oil revenue distribution will need to be spread equally as the South and West want a better deal.

What people often talk about is decentralisation rather than federalism. While it was argued that pronouncing Benghazi Libya's economic capital, because of intense public pressure is wrong, there was consensus that the decentralisation of certain areas of government might be useful. At the same time, it is important to ensure the centralisation of oil, defence and banks. Overall, it was argued that the model should be a hybrid between the centralisation of sovereign areas of government and decentralised public services.

Transitional Justice

It is important to highlight the three main reasons for why Libyans revolted: tyranny, cruelty and corruption. It was argued that unless each of these is properly dealt with and overcome, the likelihood of a renewed revolution is high. This is particularly true with regards to cruelty, which has failed to cease after liberation and is now mainly directed to former Ghaddafi supporters. Not only are there no reconciliation mechanisms in place, but measures to protect people from torture are also lacking. While the NTC has always proclaimed its

support for principles that adhere to international law, it did not yet manage follow up meticulously in reforming detention centres. The danger is that instances of torture and indefinite detention will lead to tribal uprisings. One of the participants explained that when individuals in Libya are unable to protect themselves, tribes are the most fundamental system of protection. While it is critical that this problem is dealt with quickly, doubts were expressed about the ability of the judicial system in Libya to deal with it. The suggestion was made that Libya borrows judges from other countries who are familiar with issues of corruption.

ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

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